

Large heron-like waterbirds with flat spoon-shaped bill (spoonbills) or strongly downcurved bill (ibises). Sexes alike. They fly with neck outstretched, rapid wingbeats alternating with long glides. Roost in trees; breed in colonies with platform nests made from twigs and tidal debris. Disperse widely after breeding. Silent away from colonies. Diet is fish, crustaceans and other aquatic invertebrates.

**ROYAL SPOONBILL** *Platalea regia*

Locally common native

77 cm, 1700 g. Large brilliantly white bird with long black spoon-shaped bill and black legs. Adult has black facial skin marked with a yellow patch above each eye and a red spot in the centre of the forehead, and the surface of the bill is wrinkled. In breeding plumage, large white drooping plumes on the rear of the head and a yellowish wash across breast. Juvenile has plain black facial skin, smooth bill and small black tips to wings. Feeds by walking slowly forwards in shallow water, sweeping partly open bill from side to side. **Habitat:** Tidal mudflats, occasionally on margins of freshwater lakes. Main breeding colonies at Okarito, Vernon Lagoons (Marlborough), islands just off Otago, and Invercargill Estuary. **Breeding:** Sep–Feb.



**IBISES and SPOONBILLS** Threskiornithidae

30 species; 1 breeds in New Zealand and 3 are vagrants from Australia.

The bills of this group are highly distinctive: long and down-curved in ibises, long and spatulate in spoonbills. All are gregarious; breeding, roosting, and feeding in flocks. They feed mostly in shallow freshwater lakes,

brackish coastal lagoons and estuaries, but the ibises that visit New Zealand feed also in dry habitats in Australia, e.g. pasture and public parks. The mid-toe is specialised as a comb-claw in ibises; not in spoonbills. Most develop ornamental plumes when breeding. They disperse widely after breeding and are silent away from the breeding colonies.

**118. ROYAL SPOONBILL** *Platalea regia*

Plate 28

**Other name:** Kotuku-ngutupapa

**Size:** 77 cm, 1700 g

**Distribution:** Breed in northern, eastern and southeastern Australia and New Zealand. A vagrant to Indonesia, New Guinea and some Pacific islands.

After a century of vagrant records, Royal Spoonbills have successfully colonised New Zealand. They were first reported at Castlepoint in 1861 but did not start breeding until 1949, next to the White Heron colony near Okarito. They now breed also at the Vernon Lagoons, Marlborough (since 1978); on Maukiekie Island, North Otago (since 1984); on Green Island, near Dunedin (since 1988); on Omaui Island, at the entrance to Invercargill Estuary (since 1993); in Parengarenga Harbour (since 1993); on Kapiti Island (since 1994) and Pig Island, Riverton (since 1998).

They disperse in autumn, mainly to traditional wintering sites at Parengarenga, Rangaunu and Whangarei Harbours (North-

land), Mangere oxidation ponds (Auckland), Kaituna Cut/Maketu (Bay of Plenty), Ahuriri Estuary (Hawke's Bay), Foxton Estuary (Manawatu), Farewell Spit, Motueka and Waimea Estuaries (Nelson), Avon-Heathcote Estuary and Lake Ellesmere (Canterbury). Individually colour-banded birds move widely; juveniles from the Vernon Lagoon colony have been reported from Parengarenga Harbour to Invercargill Estuary.

**Population:** From a total of 52 birds in August 1977, Royal Spoonbills have increased rapidly, perhaps at first supplemented by Australian birds but mainly through successful breeding at several new colonies. Winter censuses gave national totals of 242 birds in 1991, 377 in 1992, 502 in 1993, 560 in 1994, 610 in 1995, 659 in 1996 and 956 in 2000.

**Breeding:** At Okarito, they nest in tall kahikatea, whereas the more recently established colonies are on the ground near Black-backed Gull colonies or on top of low-growing

taupata and boxthorn scrub near shag colonies. Laying is in September–December. They lay 2–3–4 dull white eggs with brown blotches (66 x 43 mm). Both sexes incubate for 20–25 days. The age that chicks first leave the nest and fledging period are not known.

**Behaviour:** Gregarious; feeding, roosting and flying in small flocks. They fly in lines or chevrons but spread out to feed. Silent away from their breeding colony.

**Feeding:** Diet is mainly small invertebrates,

fish and frogs, taken at night as much as by day, because they rely on touch rather than sight to detect food. They feed mostly in tidal mudflats or around the margins of shallow lakes, by walking along and sweeping their bill, slightly open, in smooth, sideways arcs, by which the water movement pulls small prey from the bottom or from the water column.

**Reading:** Lowe, K.W. 1982. *Emu* 82: 163–168. Stidolph, R.H.D. 1948. *Notornis* 2: 195–196.